

Taking Christmas into Life
presented by Jack Heppner
at the Gospel Fellowship Church in Steinbach
on January 8, 2006

Have you ever participated in a program in which your piece followed what appeared to be a much more important and dynamic part of the program? Sometimes we say, “How do you follow an act like that?” Or have you ever been asked to take over a task from someone who has been exceptionally good at it in the past. Then we sometimes say, “How can I fill his or her shoes?” That is somewhat how I feel this morning.

Since November 27th, 2005 when we lit the first Advent candle and I introduced the season of Advent with my sermon, “Confession as a Way of Life” we have wound our way through the Christmas season. We even had an inter-generational celebration of Christmas on December 18th in which we had – I believe for the first time in our church history - a 91-year-old angel, a 59-year-old Joseph and many other senior types participate in the Christmas pageant – all as awkward-looking in our outlandish garb as the children whose place we had taken for this once. And all of us, I believe, have attended various family reunions, given and received gifts, eaten a little too much and done something special for at least one or two people we know. My most special thing was building a rocking horse, with the help of Ben Unrau, for my grandson Sam.

Now that we have plopped ourselves down in the new year and look back over what has just happened I suppose we just deserve a break. Some of us can feel with Peter Peters, the main character in the first-place, adult Christmas story contest in the Carillon. I assume some of you have read it. He always liked the Christmas Eve service at church mainly because there was no sermon. I quote. *Preacher Enns only said “Schluss” (that is made closing remarks) and it was short because Peter Peters figured preacher Enns wanted to quickly get home so he could eat peanuts and stay up late too...It almost felt like cheating a little bit but it felt better because your mom and dad did it with you.* So I am tempted to just make “schluss” right here so we can all go home early to veg out from the busy Christmas season. Then again, maybe that would be cheating too much!

But what I have to say this morning is, in a sense, making “schluss” to our Christmas celebrations. I was quite moved by what I saw and experienced over Christmas. I saw many acts of kindness and extraordinary attempts to connect with others. On a number of occasions people appeared at our door to offer us gifts – and they were clearly gifts of love. Some were believers – others were not. Ruth and I watched one movie version of “A Christmas Carol.” We laughed till we cried as we saw Scrooge morph from a stingy miser into a man of joy who seemed to be drunk with happiness at having discovered that people are more valuable than money. When this discovery broke, he couldn’t finish a sentence without bursting into laughter. He danced and chuckled and grinned as he went about spreading cheer and gifts to all in sight. I told Ruth I would like to play that part some time. “Yeah,” she said, “I think it might suite you. When you catch a bug you can’t shake it too readily either!”

I even had an epiphany over Christmas. It happened while on stage during our Christmas pageant. All day I had been thinking about Bolivia and the elections taking place that day. I had been thinking about the poor, many of whom we know, who for so long have been oppressed by the rich and powerful of this world. I knew that many would be voting for a change that day that at least promised hope for the destitute. I am sure you didn't notice the tear that landed in the hay of the manger as I bent over the Christ-child. I thought for a moment that if Christ were to be born today he might choose a poor barrio of Santa Cruz. For a moment I saw angels singing over a Bolivian countryside, "***Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased.***" And I heard the words of Mary before Jesus was born, when she prophesied about her son: "***He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent away empty.***" And then it was time to leave the stage.

As I was reflecting on how to follow the Christmas act in our lives in this new year, Pastor Pete reminded me that this is the traditional time of Epiphany. Yes, I thought thankfully, I just had one myself. January 6th, just two days back, has traditionally been celebrated as Epiphany. In our past it was known as "Heiligedreikoenige" or the day of "The Three Kings." After doing some research, I discovered that this religious holiday was traditionally seen as a time of making "schluss" or bringing to a close the Christmas season that had begun on the first Sunday of Advent. Or you might say a time of transition from the festive season to that of ordinary life.

As I was thinking during Christmas about what I might say on this Sunday I kept thinking about what would happen in our lives if the rules of social engagement that we use during the Christmas season became the rules for how we live during the rest of the year. I don't mean having turkey once a week or perpetual family gatherings. That would be too much for most of us. But I was thinking of a spirit of generosity, of wishing each other well, of reaching out to those less fortunate than ourselves, of setting aside "business as usual" to live and relate on a higher plane where people matter more than money. I wanted, somehow, to catapult these dynamics into our everyday lives from January to November. It was like an artesian well within me that was building up pressure.

And then I discovered a legitimate outlet for this pressure – Epiphany. Epiphany basically means "to make known," or "to reveal." So I had another epiphany, this time about Epiphany! It is a hinge on which to swing the Christmas spirit into our ordinary lives. And that is what I hope to accomplish this morning. I find it interesting that in my quest for relevance for Christian faith and life in our postmodern world, I keep bumping up against older traditions of the faith that my forefathers and those of my generation have chosen to ignore. I have spoken about this regarding Lent in the past and will have more to say about it in a few months' time. In my quest for finding meaning in faith and life in the 21st century I frequently find myself stepping forward by stepping backward. So in a sense I might sound like my great-grandfather speaking this morning. If that is the case, I am not really that embarrassed.

Epiphany traditionally centers around the story of the coming of the Magi to worship Jesus as King of Kings and Lord of Lords as recorded in Matthew 2:1-12. In recent generations we have blended the Magi into the one Christmas package, even though the evidence from Scripture seems to indicate their coming was a separate event from the manger scene. In our busy world it seems best to get it all over with at once.

I will read that story now. Imagine you are hearing it for the first time.

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him.” When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it is written by the prophet:

*And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will govern my people Israel.*

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star appeared; and he sent them to Bethlehem saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” When they had heard the king they went their way; and lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

I would like to make a few comments about this story.

First I want us to take note to whom the news of Christ’s birth was given. In Luke’s account it was given to shepherds out in the field. We have a tendency to think of them as quite ordinary folk who loved the great outdoors – the kind that would vote for the Green Party, perhaps. In fact, they were a despised lot – a low caste of “ner-do wells” who couldn’t find a better job – certainly not the kind to welcome into the inner circle of the religious establishment. But the angels appeared to them in the fields. And in Matthew’s account a star appears to astrologers somewhere in the East, probably Persia. Not only were they gentiles, they were practicing the forbidden art of divining earthly events by watching the movement of the stars. Announcing the God-man’s birth to such persons seems as unlikely a possibility as it was for the King of the Jews to be born in a stable instead of in the temple.

This is a great and amazing epiphany - God is most likely to reveal himself in places and in ways we might think quite inappropriate. But God is most comfortable, it seems, making known his presence to humble folk (like the shepherds) and those who are really searching for the truth (like the wise men) – not necessarily in the center of religious establishments. This takes us by surprise as much as it took the Scribes and Pharisees by surprise. We are generally quite good at setting up buildings and organizational structures – just like the religious people of Jesus’ day. And we too sometimes become annoyed, just like the Scribes and Pharisees, when God goes elsewhere – to “unworthy places” – to announce his presence.

And of this great epiphanal truth I am a witness. I have seen his star appear over the lives of broken and despised people on our street. I have heard the angels sing over the waffle hut on Dick and Della’s yard. We have all heard the witness Melissa Buhler gave of God coming to meet her in her brokenness through the appearance of Christine Ginter. That day the star shone more brightly than usual. I have seen many of you – just ordinary people – come alive as you take note of one sign or another that God has indeed invaded our world in Christ. There is a sense in which the incarnation event happened only once in history. But there is another sense in which the incarnation happens anew every time our fear and despair turns to hope and every time we recognize afresh that his name is Emmanuel – that God indeed has come to be with us.

Secondly, I want us to notice that the magi came to worship Jesus as King. In a sense this is a foreshadowing of the seventh angel blowing his trumpet in Revelation 11:15 and loud voices in heaven saying, ***The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever.*** Many in the early church found this vision very hard to understand, just like we do today. They saw the nations being ruled by the power of human strength, deceit and corruption. (How little things have changed.) How could they, and how can we, worship him as ***King of Kings and Lord of Lords*** when all evidence seems to be to the contrary.

So there has developed over the course of Christian history a temptation to worship Jesus as King only in a “spiritual” sense. And usually that means in a private manner. The rulers of this world have always liked that. As long as we worship our personal spiritual “king” in private but pledge allegiance to earthly powers in public we are welcomed and affirmed. But when we in fact declare our primary allegiance to the real “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” – saying that we will take our cues for real life on the ground from an outside source, we will be seen as subversives and enemies of the common good. I saw this during my years in Bolivia. As long as missionaries proclaimed only a “spiritual” king who offered hungry peasants a good life in heaven when they died, they were welcomed. It takes the peasants’ minds off of their present misery so injustice can continue unopposed. But should they proclaim Jesus as the King of Kings who cares about, not only spiritual realities, but also the injustices that create grinding poverty, they were labeled as communists. I was so labeled by fellow missionaries.

And here lies one of the greatest temptations for evangelical Christians of the 21st century – to worship a private, spiritual king who doesn’t really care that much about those who

suffer deprivation and injustice. If we want the spirit of Christmas to live on throughout the year – that is, to make the incarnation the springboard of our lifestyles from day to day – we will do well to catch a vision of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords – the one before whom every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that he indeed is Lord. Lord, not only of a spiritual realm, but of the whole created world. Even Lord over the superpowers of any generation who eventually must answer to him – whether Roman rulers of the past or the American government of the present. And as we live in this world we will take our cues for living from that higher source instead of from the status quo of our society.

And finally, I want us to notice that when Herod heard that a new king had been born, he was troubled, ***and all Jerusalem with him!*** We have already spoken about how earthly rulers are troubled when they discover that they are answerable to a higher authority. But what catches my attention here is the fact that ***all Jerusalem*** was troubled with him. Who were the people of Jerusalem? The Jews of that day. Who were their leaders? The Scribes and Pharisees. So the announcement of the birth of a new king troubled the religious establishment as well as the political establishment!

You would have thought that it would have brought great joy to the religious leaders of the day – that they would have sent out the word for a party to begin. When Herod inquired of them, they knew about the prophecies regarding the birth of this king – even where it was to take place. They even knew that this king was destined to govern the people of Israel, who at the time were enslaved by the Romans – the major world power of that day. Why were they troubled along with King Herod?

I don't know. The Bible doesn't tell us. It does tell us that when Jesus began his ministry some thirty years later these religious leaders tried to block him at every turn. It seems that the incarnation – the arrival of a new king – was a threat to their status quo. The religious leaders had carved out a position of privilege between the Roman rulers on the one hand and common Jews whom they tried to control on the other. Their salaries and pensions were assured. You might say they had it made. So just let that status quo roll on until we die in our comfort zones. We are not looking for anything that will upset our generously loaded appcart!

And this, my friends, is the picture of much of established Christianity today, especially in North America, and indeed in Steinbach. We are enamored with staying within our comfort zones – with keeping our appcarts well-balanced. We tend to bask in the warm glow of our financial securities, one of our main concerns being not to run out of cash before we die. this has become the obsession of our day that drives our economy and our dreams – at a time when 30,000 children die every day in the world from hunger and its related diseases. And that while 30,000 helpless moms and dads, who have no cash today to run out of, look on. While much of the world – even the hidden places of our city – groans and heaves in spiritual and physical despair we find ourselves, as though by reflex, scrambling to shore up the levies against the hurricane forces of a broken and bleeding world. We have developed a fortress mentality. We want the comfort of our own

New Orleans, even though we know we are already way below sea level and the levies can only hold so long.

I am not scolding you. I am challenging myself. If I want to make the incarnation of Christ count in 2006, if I want to take my cues from the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, if I want to see the star and hear the angels sing this year, if I want the spirit of Christmas to swing forward on the hinge of this Epiphany, I suspect that I will need to be open to stepping out of my comfort zone. I take courage from many of you who are doing just that. You bear witness to the truth that true life usually lies on the other side of our own comforts.

There is a line stretched out in front of each of us separating our dreams of comfort and the call of God on our lives in 2006. Some of us continue to shrink back from this line, afraid of a future we can't control or manipulate for our own benefit. Some of us have tentatively put one foot over the line and pulled it back in fear because it felt like we were losing our balance. Some of us have tasted the first-fruits of a life abandoned to the King of Kings and have firmly planted one foot across the line – and are wondering if we dare bring the other one along as well. Some of the lines before us are thin lines, beckoning us to try just a little bit of Christmas living in this new year. Some of the lines before us are broad and heavy and call for major displacement of our status quo positions.

What kind of a line stretches out in front of you? Whatever it is – step across it. Just do. If it makes you feel unsteady, reach out your hand and some of us will hold it for a while. But with your other hand reach for the outstretched hand of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords just beyond the line.

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